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Revision attached  
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

Revised  
29 December 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Communist Reactions to Certain US Military Operations  
in Vietnam (ONE Distribution Only)

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. How would the Communists react to US operations in the northern portion of the DMZ or in immediately adjacent territory of North Vietnam? We think the primary factor influencing their reactions would be what they believed these actions portended for the future. Would they estimate that the US was merely seeking to neutralize Communist bases and sanctuaries in border areas? Or would they judge that the US was making the first moves toward an eventual massive invasion of North Vietnam and thus to a major change in the war? In attempting to decipher US intentions, the Communists would take into account the nature and scope of the US operations, across the 17th parallel as well as in other areas (e.g. Laos or Cambodia). They would also consider what the US said about its objectives.

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2. Generally speaking, we believe that of the three Communist powers, Hanoi would take the most somber view of the US action. The North Vietnamese leaders almost certainly fear that the US is already engaged in a track of escalation which, given their own unwillingness to negotiate, will lead the US to progressively increase military pressures on North Vietnam. US operations in the northern DMZ, and particularly an extension into North Vietnamese territory, would reinforce fears that the US would eventually try to overthrow the Hanoi regime. China would probably not be so urgently concerned over US operations in the DMZ but Peking would be inclined to share Hanoi's fears of ultimate US intentions. As for the Soviets, they are still probably willing to estimate that US intentions are not so far reaching as Hanoi and Peking fear; but the Soviets too would be apprehensive over the direction of US policy indicated by even small scale incursions into North Vietnamese territory whether in the DMZ or beyond.

3. Based on these assessments, the Communists would determine their countermeasures. These would include not only immediate moves to cope with the new tactical situation, but also longer term preparations to deal with possible future US actions. Hanoi would have to consider not only new deployments of its own forces

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but whether the time had come to request more extensive help from other Communist countries, including the introduction of Chinese ground forces into North Vietnam in some numbers.

## II. SPECIFIC RESPONSES

4. The North Vietnamese Position. In recent months the North Vietnamese leaders have indicated increased concern over the possibility that the US will expand ground actions into NVN. In September, General Giap publicly speculated on this and warned that the US would be attacking the mainland of a member country of the "socialist camp". Recently the NVN chief of staff claimed that the US was considering "new attacks against the northern part of the demilitarized zone..." If, as these statements suggest, the North Vietnamese leadership has given serious thought to a US "invasion", they presumably have roughed out their own counter-actions, and, as Giap implies, the expected contributions from the "socialist camp".

5. The North Vietnamese would, of course, contest any US operation in the DMZ, regardless of its size. They have fairly large forces in this general area, and they would try to inflict as much punishment as possible on the US, hoping thereby to deter

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any further operations. As long as the operations were on a fairly small scale and remained within the DMZ, Hanoi would probably not go much beyond a tactical response. If the operations were expanded, however, Hanoi would probably reinforce the coastal areas with units from northern NVN. In any case, Communist forces in South Vietnam would try to take advantage of whatever opportunities were created by a thinning out of US forces for the DMZ operations.

6. It is possible that Hanoi might try to relieve the pressures on the DMZ by taking new military action in Laos. Hanoi might calculate that limited moves either in the panhandle or northern provinces would deter the US from any plans to enlarge the DMZ operations. This seems unlikely, however. Hanoi might fear that military escalation in Laos would only hasten larger US actions against North Vietnam. In any case, Hanoi would want to conserve its forces against the threat of a major US invasion.

7. If US operations in the DMZ, and especially in North Vietnamese territory immediately adjacent, were conducted on a fairly large scale, Hanoi would take some new steps to deter

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the US. More forces would be moved southward into the panhandle of North Vietnam. Propaganda denunciations and threats would be amplified. Hanoi would urge Moscow and Peking to lend their voices to such a campaign. If US operations continued to expand Hanoi would probably request Peking to bring Chinese combat troops into the northern parts of the NVN as a further deterrent and to releast North Vietnamese troops for deployment to the coastal areas and the DMZ.

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Peking's Reaction

8. The confused internal situation makes Chinese intentions difficult to assess, but we believe the Chinese remain basically cautious about risking a military confrontation with the US. Small scale US operations in the DMZ or even slightly beyond probably would not cause any change in Chinese policy. Peking would, of course, join in the propaganda chorus, and probably would be quicker than Moscow to make some demonstrative response to an appeal from Hanoi.

9. If US operations became progressively larger and extended into more of North Vietnam's territory, however, Peking would become increasingly concerned that they presaged a major invasion which would threaten the existence of the Hanoi regime. China would want to deter further US actions while still avoiding a direct confrontation with the US. Peking would probably calculate that giving firm indications that it was prepared at some point to fight would be the best means toward these ends. Appearing to hesitate or equivocate might seem to Peking to be in the long run a more dangerous course. Accordingly, we think that the Chinese leaders would, if requested by Hanoi, send ground forces into NVN. But

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these troops would be highly unlikely to go so far south as to engage US forces in the DMZ or just north of it.

10. Because their aim would be deterrence, the Chinese would probably not attempt any diversionary action elsewhere around China's periphery. Nevertheless, larger Chinese involvement in North Vietnam would probably be attended by other military movements within China -- precautionary from Peking's point of view. But the US could never be certain that such moves did not have more ominous implications. In short, should Chinese troops move into North Vietnam there would be a considerable heightening of international tensions.

11. The Soviet Position. The Soviet appraisal of the situation created by small scale US operations either in the DMZ or slightly beyond would be somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, they would recognize the tactical military reasons behind the operations. On the other hand, they would be apprehensive that US actions represented a more fundamental change in policy which would lead to increasing escalation by both sides.

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12. As long as the US actions remained fairly limited in size we think Soviet reactions would be confined to materiel and political support for Hanoi. Soviet support would probably include those kinds of weapons which could strengthen Hanoi's capability to deal with a major US invasion (limited range ground support missiles, coastal defense missiles). The Soviets might believe that providing "volunteers" to man some of these weapons would have some deterrent value on the US. Along with such aid, the Soviets would also try to check further US action by warnings and perhaps a demonstrative political protest against the US (e.g. terminating certain negotiations or contacts). As long as the US limited the size and scope of its operations, we continue to believe, however, that the Soviets would avoid committing their own combat forces to direct participation, or provoking crisis situations elsewhere in the world.

13. If US military operations seemed likely to expand well into NVN and on a fairly large scale, the Soviets would anticipate a critical turning point in the war. They would fear that the US actions presaged a direct threat to Hanoi's existence and would foresee as a consequence a vastly increased

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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

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Chinese presence and influence. They would feel compelled to become much more active in trying to forestall such developments, but they would face a difficult dilemma.

14. At this juncture, there would be the option of trying to force the US to desist. Even though the lines of communication to North Vietnam are long and hazardous and dependent on the dubious good-will of China, the Soviets could commit their own combat forces in NVN. If they did so, however, it would not be in expectation of exerting a decisive influence on the military situation, but rather of creating such extreme international tensions that the US would have to seek a compromise. Another way of achieving a similar result would be to start a new campaign against Berlin. The advantage of this move would be that the Soviets could keep the situation more easily under their own control. Moscow might believe that

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a comparatively minor and well-controlled harassment of West Berlin would, instead of prejudicing its policy of moderation towards Western Europe, arouse the Europeans to further resentment of US policy in Vietnam. In considering these courses, Soviets would recognize the risks of a truly formidable confrontation with the US.

15. On the other hand, the Soviet recognize their influence in Hanoi will remain limited. Moscow cannot force the North Vietnamese to stop fighting. The most it can do is to urge Hanoi to compromise, or finally to withdraw support so that military defeat becomes more or less inevitable.

16. This is the essence of the Soviet dilemma. The USSR has a great interest in the outcome of the war in Vietnam; but it has only limited power to influence that outcome. We cannot be sure how the Soviets are likely to resolve their problems; their dilemma would, of course, be sharpened if the very existence of the Hanoi regime appeared to be threatened by US actions. In these circumstances, they would probably test their principal options: they would urge Hanoi to compromise, though they almost certainly would not feel they could afford to withhold aid; simultaneously, they would deliberately

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heighten tensions with the US and probably make some moves involving higher risks of confrontation. In any case they would certainly make it politically costly in all areas of relations with the US and would mount a major effort to arouse international opinion against the continuation of US military operations in North Vietnam.

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